



Early Education's national survey gives first picture of outdoor provision across the country

During its 80th anniversary, celebrating the role of the outdoors in children's development, Early Education conducted a questionnaire survey to gain an overview of outdoor provision in the UK. Learning through Landscapes supported this valuable survey by helping to collate and analyse the data, and the two organisations will be working together to address some of the issues arising from the survey.

The main purposes of the survey were to:

- Raise awareness of the importance of high quality outdoor experiences for children
- Gain a picture of the current situation for outdoor provision
- Identify the issues affecting provider's ability to deliver high quality outdoor play
- Provide information in order to identify ways in which to support sector in the future

Well over 800 questionnaire forms were returned, indicating the high level of interest and concern about this issue. A representative sample of 620 responses was analysed. Responses were collated according to provider types because initial analysis suggested issues were different in different types of provision. It is important to bear in mind that these results give a skewed picture as respondents all felt sufficiently motivated to take the time to complete the optional questionnaire: the full picture is likely to be less optimistic.

An overwhelming 98.5% of respondents said that outdoor provision was essential or important. Of these 86.5% thought that it was essential and an additional 12% thought that it was important. Only 3 respondents felt that it was not very important for their children and none that it was not important at all.

When asked why practitioners thought outdoor experience was important or essential, there was an emphasis on the physical importance of outdoor experience, with much less comment upon other aspects of learning and development.

The three providers who responded that outdoor provision was not very important all explained that they made this response because they are all sited in church halls; children only attend for 2 1/2 hours; all children have access to outdoor space at home and there are parks and open spaces locally which the groups visit.

Whilst 100% of both nursery class and nursery school respondents said outdoor provision was essential for children, 36 reception class respondents felt that it was important rather than essential, raising a question about interpretation of the Foundation Stage curriculum with respect to the role of the outdoor classroom for 4 and 5 year olds.

A surprising 75% of respondents said that they had immediate access to outdoor provision for the children that they work with.

Childminders and the maintained sector, other than reception classes, felt that they had good access to the outdoors. Two out of three of the respondents from of the other provider types said that they had good access; however the interpretation on accessibility was varied. Sampling showed some settings who had fairly good outdoor facilities with slightly limited access answered 'no' to this question while others answered 'yes' who in fact had little opportunity to go outside.

Access and provision was in some cases, far from ideal; comments explaining lack of access included:

- Opening into car parks and other unsafe areas; temporary fencing
- Sites shared with other groups or classes; wide age range using the space
- Ramps or steps or stairs to get to ground level
- Litter and open drains; wild bushes in alley not dealt with by owners
- Vandalism; no chance to leave equipment outside; residents' objections
- Weather and/or waterlogged ground; dirty shoes coming into indoor areas
- Safety and security (and as perceived by parents)
- Budget; resources and storage
- Timetabling and set times; restriction by demands of literacy and numeracy.

Less than a third of providers (30%) currently have a policy for outdoor play provision, and considerable variation was evident from policies returned with questionnaires: some only referred to safety matters or were part of an aspect of provision, such as physical development, while few dealt with the full role of outdoor provision.

Just under 55% of respondents said that they and/or the colleagues they work with have had professional training relating to outdoor provision. Clear differences emerge amongst the different types of provider with the maintained sector receiving a higher level of professional input; however, only 54% of the 161 reception teachers had attended training. What the training consisted of was very variable, with some being considerably limited with regard to the full role of outdoor provision in Early Years education.

This very interesting survey contains a great deal more data for future analysis. Results so far give indications for the development of the most effective support for practitioners, particularly in the areas of:

- Access: by helping practitioners to identify barriers and limitations to the provision of effective outdoor play in their setting and providing the support they need to overcome them.
- Policies: conveying the role a well-thought through, practical and useful specific policy for outdoor provision can have in helping to achieve effective practice and supporting the development of these for each unique setting.
- Training: by exploring the reasons for the low level of training received by voluntary and private sector practitioners, especially childminders, and practitioners in reception classes, and by examining how to make sure that good quality training on outdoor provision is available to all across all parts of the UK.